

Mayor's Housing Task Force Report

Executive Summary

In 2006, Mayor Scott W. Lang established an Inter Agency Housing Task Force to address the problem of abandoned and distressed properties in New Bedford. These properties have an adverse social and economic impact on a number of New Bedford's neighborhoods.

The Task Force focuses primarily on properties which are abandoned, distressed, in tax title, pose a health/safety risk, are subject to vandalism and are used for illegal activities. The Task Force is comprised of City departments that deal with housing, safety, and neighborhood issues and is coordinated by the Office of Housing and Community Development.

The Task Force develops and implements programs and initiatives to further the goals of developing housing and continued revitalization of New Bedford's neighborhoods. These programs include:

- 1. Identification of problem properties.** This goal involves the development of an integrated land records database and comprehensive inventory of property-based information. Problem properties are then evaluated to determine feasibility for rehabilitation or, in the case of those properties that are severely distressed and pose a health/safety risk, for demolition.
- 2. Coordination of agency efforts to pursue problem properties aggressively.** The Inter Agency Task Force meets monthly to discuss the progress of properties that have been identified as problems. Agencies use individual programs and powers to pursue such properties:
 - As part of the Tax Title Foreclosure Program, the City's Tax Title attorney pursues properties that are tax delinquent with the goal of returning such properties to productive use and to the City's tax rolls.
 - The Attorney General's Receivership Program is helping to empower the City to pursue problem properties that are not tax delinquent, but consistently fail to meet code requirements.
 - The Health and Minimum Housing Departments to aggressively pursue properties with health and code violations.
 - The City of New Bedford Police Department pursue properties where occupants are involved with illegal activities.
 - The City of New Bedford Fire Department targets



721 S. First Street is slated for demolition in 2007. This property, damaged by fire, has been open to the elements and is uninhabitable.

properties that show a current or potential risk for arson.

- 3. Return properties to productive use.** The Inter Agency Task Force uses existing programs to develop or sell properties to revitalize neighborhoods and boost the City's tax base. Abandoned or foreclosed properties that have returned to the City are offered to developers through a reclamation/disposition program. In some cases, the City uses federal and state funds to develop these properties directly for first time homebuyers with funding to create affordable housing opportunities and neighborhood revitalization. Finally, properties that cannot be developed are offered to adjacent landowners through the "Abutters Lot Program," to ensure that they are maintained.

MAYOR'S INTER AGENCY HOUSING TASK FORCE

City Solicitor's Office
Chief Financial Officer
Housing & Community Development
Inspectional Services Department
Department of Planning
Department of Public Facilities
Fire Department
Department of Human Services
Department of Health
Police Department
Tax Title Attorney
Attorney General's Office

Housing Task Force Initiatives and Achievements in 2006

The goals of the Housing Taskforce are concentrated into five initiatives. The categories are Enforcement, Training and Guidance, Pursuit of Tax Title, Attorney General's Receivership Program, and Property Disposal. The Housing Task Force committed time and energy to each these initiatives in the past year and progress is reported below:

Enforcement

The Enforcement Initiative is based on the need to improve **data collection** for problem properties and to target properties with illegal activities or health, safety and housing code violations through comprehensive code inspections and enforcement. In the past year, the Housing Task Force worked to create such a database, including ongoing investigations and information gathering meetings. Coordinated planning has been undertaken to **target code enforcement raids**. The Police Department and Inspectional Services are preparing **training for police officers** to recognize common building violations. Information gathering is taking place to recognize a "hot spot" area to target with the initial concentrated enforcement effort.



Abandoned for 10+ years, 949 County Street is a major concern for the neighbors.

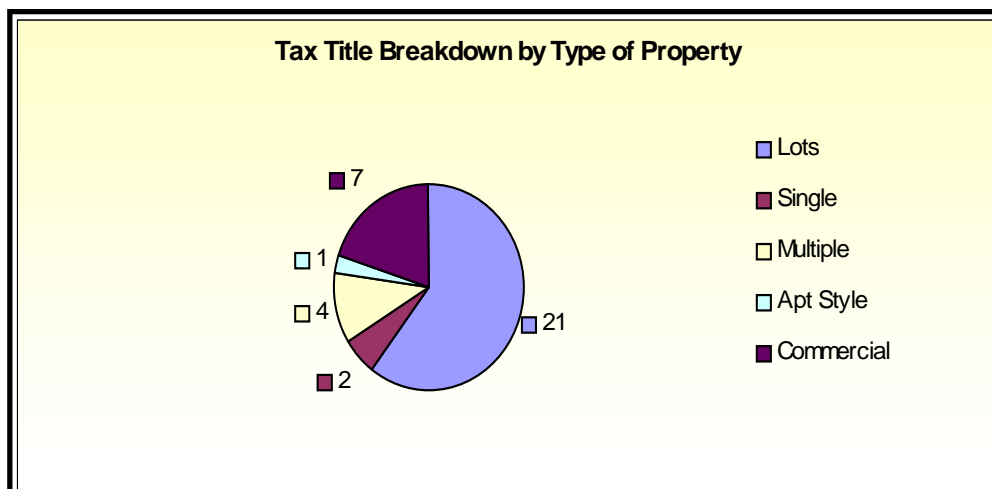
Training and Guidance

The purpose of this initiative is to clarify property owner's responsibilities and rights, particularly landlords. The City of New Bedford, in partnership with the Attorney General's Office, convened a **landlord informational seminar** to explain what is expected from property owners. Over 120 landlords and City officials attended the informational seminar held December 13, 2006. Due to the success of the event, additional events will be organized that target specific issues that were brought up during the seminar.

Pursuit of Tax Title

The Tax Title Initiative is the key engine to return tax delinquent properties to the City's tax rolls. In the last year, the Housing Task Force achieved its goal to create a **comprehensive list of tax title properties** and a "**Most Wanted**" list of buildings—those structures that are severely distressed and pose a health/safety risk for demolition. The prioritized list has been analyzed by professional engineers and approved by City Council. The four buildings approved for demolition are: 721 S. First St., 56 Cove Street, 523 Purchase St. and 1537 Acushnet Ave. An additional goal of this initiative is to target the top 25 properties to aggressively pursue through land court. From January 1st, 2006, there have been 35 properties brought in with a total assessed value of \$4,513,500, as well as the collection of \$2,393,650 in payments. Finally, the Housing Task Force seeks to return tax title properties to productive use. To this end, the Treasurer's Office notifies abutters twice a year to offer adjacent vacant lots: since January 1st, 2006, 16 lots have been sold to abutters.

Since January 1st, 2006, 35 properties with a total assessed value of \$4,513,500, were brought back to the City; \$2,393,650 in overdue taxes were collected.



1 Washington Square. An abandoned 1880 three family home in the South Central neighborhood. The city received it through tax title in 2007.

Attorney General's Receivership Program

The key goal of this initiative is to develop and implement the Attorney General's "Receivership Program." The law creating this program, M.G.L. c. 111, 127I, was enacted in 1993 to provide for the appointment of receivers by the courts of the state to undertake and oversee the rehabilitation of residential properties with persistent, unremedied code violations. The statute also provides that an action to appoint a receiver may be brought by a public agency, such as the Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD). To meet this goal, the OHCD is focusing on three properties to determine whether they meet the requirements for the program. Additional inspections are needed before filing a petition with the housing court to appoint a receiver for the properties.

Property Disposal

The Property Disposal Initiative provides the City with the opportunity to recycle, redevelop or rehabilitate underutilized properties. Among the goals of this initiative was to develop a listing of lots that meet the requirements for the infill housing program. This is an ongoing process when properties come in to the City via land court. At this time, no properties have met the requirements.

Currently, the Task Force is crafting a Vacant Building Registry program to protect the health, safety and welfare of the public. The program would require property owners to implement a maintenance plan for the vacant property. A draft ordinance is being reviewed by Inspectional Services and other key City departments. Discussions have taken place on implementation strategies in hope of passage by the City Council in the spring.

The Task Force is working to develop a reclamation/disposition program for abandoned foreclosed properties while creating an RFP process for historic, affordable, and market-rate properties along with in-fill housing opportunities. This work has resulted in a change to the disposal of property ordinance, passed by City Council, allowing the City to decide on the method used to dispose of these properties. A subcommittee has been established to discuss the potential of each incoming property.

As for specific properties: a RFP for 115 Summer Street. has been issued and proposals are in to review; 34 Viall will be rehabilitated by the OHCD with building plans becoming finalized soon; RFPs for the former Civil Defense Building , Purchase Street Fire Department Repair Station and One Washington Square are being edited for review. One Washington Square, a recent tax title property, is a historic Victorian building that has been vacant over ten years and is a natural "gateway" between the South Central and South End Neighborhoods.



102 Ruth Street. This property has been abandoned and is a top target of the Task Force due to the property's blight and unremedied code violations.

***"The message is simple:
The City of New Bedford
will no longer bear the
cost and responsibility of
maintaining vacant and
derelict private property
at taxpayer's expense."***

***Mayor Scott Lang
July 17, 2006***



109 Hillman Street. This property, the former Civil Defense Building, has been used for storage by the City. An RFP will be advertised in 2007 for future reuse.



115 Summer Street. The first tax title property received by the Task Force is currently being redeveloped.



34 Viall Street. Received through tax title, this three-family building will be renovated for a 1st time home buyer by the Office of Housing and Community Development.

Next Steps for the Housing Task Force in 2007

- Completion of Vacant Building Registry Ordinance.
- Property management for tax title properties and other City owned properties.
- Develop a Request For Proposal (RFP) template for the various tax title properties.
- Host other Informational Seminars and target absentee landlords.
- Coordinated code enforcement inspections.
- Cross departmental database for information including building, police, health and fire.
- Continually evaluate buildings for demolition.
- Focus the Receivership Program on properties that are in disrepair and have numerous code violations.
- Review possible ordinance change to lot size requirements for tax title vacant lots.



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